




Defining Mindfulness: A Review of Existing Definitions and Suggested Refinements

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Abstract

Objectives Mindfulness research is hampered by the multiplicity of definitions of mindfulness. This heterogeneity, as reflected in the variability of mindfulness scales, limits the ability to generalize findings and hinders attempts to synthesize available studies. This paper explores traditional and contemporary definitions of mindfulness, aiming to extract core components and provide a refined and clearly specified definition suitable for underpinning measurement in psychological science.

Method This narrative review broadly analyzes and synthesizes the conceptual frameworks across various definitions of mindfulness to identify core components of mindfulness within Buddhist and psychological science literature.

Results Traditional Buddhist definitions of mindfulness focus on (a) memory and remembrance, (b) present-centered awareness, and (c) ethicality, but lack conceptual commonality due to the diversity of Buddhist schools and to the intricate context in which mindfulness is embedded. Definitions in psychological science show greater conceptual agreement and emphasize (a) present-centered awareness and bare attention, and (b) attitudes of acceptance and non-judgment.

Conclusions Taken together, there is a lack of conceptual commonality and clarity on mindfulness definitions, to the extent that it may be challenging to propose a single definition that fully encapsulates both Buddhist and psychological science perspectives. For the purposes of psychological science, refinements are suggested by (a) including four scopes of mindfulness that clarify present-centeredness as awareness of and attention to body sensations, affective valence (i.e., pleasant, unpleasant, neutral), cognition and emotional states (including impulses and action tendencies), and the external environment (i.e., external sensory experience and interpersonal interactions); and (b) emphasizing the allowing and equanimous attitudes as the key qualities of mindfulness. Mindfulness is therefore defined as: “present-centered awareness of and bare attention to body sensations, affective valence, cognitive and emotional phenomena, and the external environment with an allowing and equanimous attitude.”

Preregistration The study is not preregistered.

Keywords Mindfulness definition · Conceptualization · Measurement · Buddhism · Psychological science · Present-moment awareness · Allowing attitude · Equanimous attitude

Mindfulness has gained significant attention in psychological science circles over the years (Valerio, 2016). As a concept originating from Buddhism, its assimilation into secular, psychological science contexts was facilitated by

adaptations that omitted explicit reference to Buddhist doctrines and soteriology and increased its appeal in contemporary mainstream settings (Brazier, 2013; McMahan, 2008). Mindfulness research has led to the development of new therapies, programs, and measures, as well as the exploration of the effects and mechanisms of such interventions (Baer, 2003; Gotink et al., 2015; Gu et al., 2015). However, psychological science research is significantly hampered by the multiplicity of definitions of mindfulness. This paper explores the conceptual underpinnings of existing definitions of mindfulness. Firstly, Buddhist perspectives at the origin of the concept are considered. The authors acknowledge the difficulty in understanding the complexity of Buddhist

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scholarship, and while recognizing our limited understanding of its breadth, we felt it important to carefully consider definitions within this crucial historical context. Then, definitions of mindfulness from a psychological science perspective are explored. Throughout the paper, core components across Buddhist and psychological science conceptualizations of mindfulness are reviewed. Finally, we suggest a refined definition of mindfulness suitable for the context of psychological science with the intention that this definition might help to guide future research.

Introducing mindfulness into psychological science required adapting its definition from its original Buddhist context (Schmidt, 2011). Consequently, contemporary definitions have distanced themselves from Buddhist precepts to align with academic, skills training, and psychotherapeutic contexts (Ditrich, 2016). In psychological science, most definitions of mindfulness align with that of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), arguably the leading figure bringing mindfulness approaches into healthcare and psychological science, describing it as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Operationally, Bishop et al. (2004) proposed a two-component definition of mindfulness composed of self-regulation of attention and a specific orientation to experience consisting of curiosity and acceptance. They suggest that mindfulness can be seen as “a process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of nonelaborative awareness to current experience and a quality of relating to one’s experience within an orientation of curiosity, experiential openness, and acceptance” (p. 234). Although these definitions guide most current psychological studies on mindfulness, these developments are met with disagreements from academics and scholars who argue against the disconnection from its roots and highlight the value of incorporating foundational Buddhist perspectives for present-day discussions. Criticisms against the dominant psychological definition claim that it oversimplifies mindfulness and fails to capture its complexity (Sun, 2014), as contemporary definitions overlook or only hint at important aspects found in Buddhist views, such as ethics (Baer, 2015; Grossman, 2008; Monteiro et al., 2015). This limitation is seen as hindering the potential benefits of traditional mindfulness practices (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2003).

However, applying Buddhist conceptions in the Western context poses challenges due to their spiritual and philosophical nature, which may not be readily accepted in secular clinical settings (Lindahl, 2015). In addition to enhancing the clarity, accuracy, and effective communication of mindfulness concepts and practices for a variety of non-Buddhist populations, such definitions allow for measurements of mindfulness that deepen our understanding of its nature and effects (Baer, 2019). While there are commonalities,

differences persist between traditional and contemporary definitions, both within and across paradigms (Monteiro et al., 2015; Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). The multiplicity of mindfulness conceptualizations and their corresponding measures brings about a fragmentation within the field, in which the results of psychological studies relying on different conceptualizations and assessments of mindfulness cannot be compared or meaningfully synthesized in meta-analyses, which limits the generalizability of the findings (Bergomi et al., 2013).

In addition to varying within and across disciplines, the conceptualization of mindfulness in psychological frameworks differs from the views of Buddhist and experienced practitioners. For example, a study with Buddhist clergy and laypeople found important differences between their understandings of mindfulness and what is measured by various psychological mindfulness scales (Christopher et al., 2014). Such differences reflect (a) the importance of judging instead of non-judging for mindfulness, (b) the lack of items measuring the ability to redirect attention to the present moment, (c) the lack of measurement of awareness of suffering and aversion, and (d) the focus on internal experience instead of the development of compassion, interconnectedness, and extending beyond oneself. Another study with senior Buddhist clergy also echoed the lack of correspondence between psychological and Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness (Feng et al., 2018). The themes suggested by Buddhist clergy include (a) the capacity to flexibly alternate narrow attention and broad awareness, (b) skillfully alternating between these two modes according to the situation, (c) being purposeful in one’s mindfulness, (d) developing profundity in mindfulness through insight and understanding of phenomena, (e) judging wisely to differentiate what is wholesome and what is not, (f) reinforcing one’s ethical conduct and compassion, and (g) gradually moving from effortful to more refined and subtle mindfulness through practice. Another study with experienced practitioners noted a lack of reference to memory and ethics in various psychological definitions of mindfulness (Lustig et al., 2024).

Importantly, the ongoing attempts to define mindfulness underscore its significance. Within psychological science, the definition influences (a) how mindfulness is measured, (b) the practice and contents of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) and programs (MBPs), (c) the assessment of the efficacy of MBIs/MBPs, and (d) research into the mechanisms of change in a variety of outcomes. Given these far-reaching implications, an overview of existing definitions is essential. In light of Clark and Watson (2019), a strong conceptual basis is required before the empirical testing of a concept to ensure substantive validity. The present narrative review explores the conceptual landscape of mindfulness by analyzing overarching conceptualizations across definitions that have emerged in various contexts and traditions.

Instead of conducting a systematic review, this discussion aims to synthesize central characteristics of mindfulness as identified through a broad and comprehensive examination of existing frameworks. By engaging with those conceptualizations, we hope to clarify the fundamental components of mindfulness, laying the ground for future research and practical applications in a variety of related fields. To this end, our search methodology began by identifying influential and seminal works aimed to define and discuss the concept of mindfulness from Buddhist and psychological science perspectives. We have relied on backward and forward citation tracking to investigate additional contributions to the literature, including earlier foundational research as well as subsequent developments within the field. In addition, we carried out a more specified search process by examining a variety of discussions emphasized in the literature, thus enlarging the scope of sources and perspectives contributing to the understanding of mindfulness and its core components. This iterative search strategy enabled a comprehensive, albeit non-systematic appraisal of relevant inquiries into the multifaceted definition of mindfulness, providing a broad and representative basis for a thematic synthesis, analysis, and nuanced understanding of the core components of the construct. It is worth noting that the present review focuses on the core characteristics of the conceptualizations of mindfulness instead of its outcomes (e.g., emotional regulation), which are sometimes conflated. In addition, the review of conceptions of mindfulness draws on Buddhist views to acknowledge the historical legacy of mindfulness. Conceptualizations that are fully divorced from Buddhist inspiration are not considered in this paper as such separate frameworks are grounded in distinct theoretical foundations that appear to be empirically differentiated (Karl & Fischer, 2020).

Thus, this paper discusses the conceptual underpinnings of definitions from both Buddhist and contemporary psychological perspectives to extract their core components. This will allow for an appraisal of the points of convergence and divergence across the various definitions of mindfulness and identify bridgeable conceptual gaps across frameworks. The last section offers possible clarifications and a refined definition of mindfulness applicable to psychological science to advance discussions about its meaning.

Mindfulness in Buddhist Thought

The earliest discussions of mindfulness and its practice can be found in Buddhist teachings. Known as *sati* in Pali, mindfulness holds a variety of definitions and understandings, which are most often derived from its intended practice and its contextual application within early Buddhist scriptures (Bodhi, 2011a; Gethin, 2015). Fundamentally, mindfulness

is perceived as a holistic praxis that transforms one's appreciation of life through experiential and canonical learning (Brazier, 2013). Some views consider the more elementary forms of mindfulness as a general ability and intrinsically neutral concept, often referred to as the faculty of mindfulness or as mechanistic mindfulness (Amaro & Singh, 2020). However, at higher levels of understanding, it is meant to be conceptualized and practiced in a specific manner, particularly by incorporating ethical and doctrinal considerations. As such, in Buddhist terms, mindfulness largely aligns with Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), as described in the Noble Eightfold Path, a set of practices believed to lead to spiritual enlightenment.

As the seventh factor of the path, mindfulness is therefore embedded in mutually reinforcing constituents at play in reaching the ultimate attainment of Buddhism, whose goal is the cessation of suffering (Van Gordon et al., 2015). The other elements of the path encompass wisdom (Right Understanding and Right Thought); morality, virtues, or ethical conduct (Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood); and meditation or concentration (Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration) (Bodhi, 2010; Huxter, 2015). Furthermore, mindfulness is vital to various aspects and elements of the Buddhist framework, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Seven Factors of Awakening, among others (Brazier, 2018). Hence, a standalone traditional Buddhist definition of mindfulness divorced from this wider context is incomplete at best (Gethin, 2001; Huxter, 2015).

It is important to note that the three main traditions of Buddhism—*Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna*—may differ to some extent in their conceptions and practices of mindfulness (Harvey, 2015; Monteiro et al., 2015). The primary variations are of ontological order, meaning that they relate to the metaphysical nature of being and existence itself. While *Theravāda* leans toward a dualistic perspective, the other two traditions adopt a non-dualistic view of the world (Bodhi, 2011b). Specifically, the soteriology of *Theravāda* thought emphasizes the opposition between enlightenment (*nirvāṇa*) and the cycle of birth and rebirth (*saṃsāra*). Thus, practitioners aim to pursue the former and free themselves from the latter. Nevertheless, while alluding to ontological implications, Bodhi (2011b) suggested that this duality, among the many others highlighted in canonical texts, does not ascribe a strict metaphysical stance of speculative nature to the *Theravāda* tradition. Instead, he suggests that this apparent duality is grounded in a pragmatic conception of the polarities inherent to reality, from which the Buddha builds a framework for the cessation of suffering. In contrast, the non-dual *Mahāyāna* school perceives all phenomena as inherently devoid of substance, emphasizing the realization of emptiness on the path to enlightenment. Here, the distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* is eventually transcended for a higher unifying reality. These doctrinal

disparities can lead to confusion regarding the intent behind mindfulness practice and understanding among adherents of different schools of thought. Additionally, different frameworks of mindfulness can have distinct effects on associated practices, such as increasing arousal or deepening relaxation (Amihai & Kozhevnikov, 2014). However, despite the differences in traditional definitions (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011), all three schools adhere to the Noble Eightfold Path, indicating a shared foundation among these conceptions (Van Gordon et al., 2015).

The definitions of mindfulness in Buddhist thought encompass three core aspects, including (a) memory and remembrance, (b) present-moment awareness, and (c) ethics. These facets will be explored in the following sections to provide a deeper understanding of the traditional conceptions of mindfulness.

Memory and Remembrance

Mindfulness is deeply rooted in various aspects of Buddhist doctrines (Bodhi, 2012). In the early teachings of the Buddha, *sati* was originally defined as remembrance, memory, or recalling (Bodhi, 2011b). Canonical conceptions referred to *sati* as a form of episodic memory that “remembers and recollects what was done and said a long time ago” (Bodhi, 2012, p. 1078). Mindfulness, when viewed as a recalling ability, serves the purpose of developing wisdom from previous learning (Levman, 2018a). However, scholars have offered different interpretations of what this remembrance entails, emphasizing the need for clarification. Some interpret *sati* as (a) holding in mind, (b) recalling the past or remembering teachings, or (c) remembering to be mindful in everyday life or during mindfulness practice (Harvey, 2015).

In a discussion regarding the role of remembrance, recalling, and memory in Buddhist conceptions of mindfulness, Anālayo (2018a, b) suggested that mindfulness is related to, yet distinct from, memory. He argues that while the etymological origins of *sati* may be rooted in memory or remembrance, the use of the term may not be confined and necessarily related to memory, but rather best understood alongside other canonical notions (e.g., clear comprehension). From an alternative perspective, Levman (2017) suggested that *sati* is derived from the ancient Indic term *smṛti*, meaning memory and remembrance. In his view, the modern translation of *sati* as mindfulness limits the interpretations that *sati* holds in association with memory. Thus, he suggests that while *sati* may denote different aspects of Buddhist teachings, it cannot be comprehensively conceived without considering memory as one of its core components. In this context, an example of *sati* is when one remembers a specific way of breathing that a practitioner experienced in prior meditation and applies it in ongoing practice, or when one recalls the Buddha’s teachings and their personal relevance

(Levman, 2017, 2018a, b). *Sati* is also associated with working memory, which integrates information from long-term and short-term memories, making them available for use in the present and facilitating learning experiences (Rapgay, 2019). It is further linked to holding in mind information, objects of attention, or ethical qualities (Dreyfus, 2011; Gethin, 2001), as well as the process of remembering to be mindful in the first place (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006).

As such, different scholars ascribe different meanings, functions, and relationships between memory and mindfulness. Nevertheless, while explicit memory is widely recognized as important for *sati*, scholars caution against directly conflating mindfulness and memory (Anālayo, 2018b; Bodhi, 2011b; Walpola et al., 2022). They suggest that the literal translation of *sati* as memory may not accurately reflect its original and array of diverse meanings. In certain parts of canonical Buddhist texts, conceptualizing *sati* as memory does not appear appropriate, and it would be more suitable to equate it with present-moment awareness (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006). In their model of Right Mindfulness, Walpola et al. (2022) suggested that memory processes relating to the past (i.e., episodic and semantic memory) are relevant to the faculty of mindfulness, a more elemental and restricted form of mindfulness that is distinct from Right Mindfulness as found within the Eightfold Path. Instead, Right Mindfulness would involve working memory, as it is oriented toward processes occurring in the present moment. Hence, an alternative approach is to consider *sati* as aiding, facilitating, and enhancing the processes of recollection (Anālayo, 2018a), but that it primarily involves becoming conscious of the present moment to this end (Anālayo, 2018c). Mindfulness thus serves as the foundation for the development of evolved recalling abilities rather than being synonymous with memory. As Nanamoli and Bodhi (1995) stated, “keen attentiveness to the present forms the basis for an accurate memory of the past” (p. 1255).

Present-Moment Awareness

Being in the present moment is seen as an important feature in the development of mindfulness in Buddhism (Anālayo, 2019a). An agreement seems to emerge among certain Buddhist scholars to support this view, and much of the discussion about the significance of present-centered awareness stems from practical considerations. As a description of the centrality of the present moment in traditional views, Bodhi (2011a) stated that “to establish mindfulness is not to set about remembering something that occurred in the past, but to adopt a particular stance towards one’s present experience” (p. 25). To this end, Buddhist mindfulness practice within certain traditions, most notably Theravāda (Sharf, 2015), is rooted in the *satipaṭṭhāna*, which represents the four foundations of mindfulness. These involve attending to

the body (*kāya*), feelings (*vedanā*), mind (*citta*), and mental objects or phenomena (*dharma*). Although the understanding and practice of the satipaṭṭhāna can differ across Buddhist texts, translations, and traditions (Anālayo, 2013), the instructions that accompany the establishment of mindfulness according to these four axes often appear to contextualize mindfulness as a lucid and complete attention to the present (Anālayo, 2019a; Wallace & Bodhi, 2006). In this sense, certain scholars support the view that Buddhist practices and conceptions of mindfulness necessitate present-moment awareness.

Despite the importance placed on being present, different Buddhist traditions may diverge in their views regarding the role and significance of present-centeredness in mindfulness practice. According to Dunne (2015), classic Buddhist schools, like Theravāda, value being in the present moment but allow for interruptions and conceptual apparatuses to explore teachings and determine the ethical character of one's moment-to-moment immediate experience. On the other hand, the non-dual school *Mahāmudrā* encourages a mindfulness practice in which remembrance and ethical judgments are set aside for a fuller and continuous focus on the here-and-now. Most other Buddhist schools fall somewhere along that spectrum. Hence, although present-centeredness is central to mindfulness, both practical and theoretical perspectives acknowledge it as a necessary yet insufficient condition for its development, particularly when considering the intricate context in which mindfulness is embedded (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006).

Other scholars challenge the notion that present-moment focus is at the core of mindfulness, criticizing it as a popular view in contemporary mindfulness definitions, labeled “here-and-now-ism” (Bazzano, 2013; Brazier, 2013). Purser (2015) outlined several issues with a present-oriented understanding of mindfulness. Firstly, it could create self-evaluation against one's ability to stay in the present. Secondly, it would rigidly position the self in the present while conceptualizing a linear past-present-future structure. In this sense, directing attention to the present moment might establish a firm separation between the self and its experiences. This approach may lead the practitioner to misconstrue the present as a fixed point, resulting in the detachment of the self from the natural flow of time. Instead of actively participating, the individual could assume a detached role, seeing time as an object rather than experiencing it from within. Lastly, a present-focused orientation may lead to attempts to reify and capture the present, which can be seen as intrinsically conceptual and ungraspable (Rosenbaum & Bohart, 2021). While the first issue might have specific relevance for MBIs and MBPs, other concerns conflict with Buddhist teachings, which assert that all things conforming to the linear past-present-future structure are bound to be insubstantial (*anattā*), impermanent (*aniccā*), and unsatisfactory (*dukkhā*) (i.e., the

Three Marks of Existence; Walsh, 1995). Thus, rather than fixating on the present, the aim would be to develop an experiential understanding that all perceptual phenomena possess these characteristics as one observes momentary subjective experience.

Additionally, the role of remembrance and memory challenges the central role assigned to present-moment awareness in Buddhist conceptions of mindfulness, as memory involves recalling the past (Purser & Milillo, 2015). Rather, mindfulness would involve *being present*, not necessarily *in the present*, with the object of attention in mind, regardless of whether it is a past event. In some instances, the significance of present-centered awareness is argued to be more prominent in Right Concentration, the eighth aspect of the Eightfold Path, than in Right Mindfulness (Mikulas, 2011; Van Gordon et al., 2015). These views suggest that concentration helps to anchor in the here-and-now as one directs attention to and focuses on the present. In comparison, mindfulness would involve broader awareness of all mental experiences, not just those tied to the present. Nonetheless, one suggested alternative conceptualization is to view present-centered awareness as a core component of mindfulness, through which Right Concentration can build upon and eventually develop (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006). The reviewed conceptions point to the fact that, although necessary, mindfulness cannot be reached through simple present-moment awareness. Rather, mindfulness necessitates an enriched awareness that incorporates clear comprehension and insight into the nature of phenomena.

In conclusion, multiple perspectives support the view that present-moment awareness serves as an important feature in the development of mindfulness in Buddhism, all the while being one of its central components. Although there are differing views among Buddhist traditions and scholarly discussions about a complete orientation to the here-and-now, present-centeredness still appears to play a significant role in complementing a deeper understanding of mindfulness. Nevertheless, Buddhist frameworks recognize the limitations of a solely present-oriented focus, and encourage a practice of mindfulness that is broader in scope, incorporating a clear comprehension of phenomena, insight, and ethical engagement. The following sub-section will explore the role of these aspects in providing a more comprehensive understanding and robust foundation of mindfulness in Buddhist frameworks.

Ethical Considerations

Although there exist multiple views regarding the degree to which memory and present-moment awareness are central to the Buddhist conception of mindfulness, the ethical aspects of mindfulness are widely acknowledged. As discussed earlier, some argue that the most fundamental understandings

of sati in classical Buddhist texts, namely the faculty of mindfulness or mechanistic mindfulness, can be considered an ethically neutral faculty, focusing solely on retention and attention and without inherent moral underpinnings (Amaro & Singh, 2020). However, this view does not concur with a comprehensive understanding of mindfulness advanced in Buddhism, which is imbued in an ethical context (Dreyfus, 2011). Indeed, this somewhat limited conception may not sufficiently align with the intricacies of traditional mindfulness definitions, and would not necessarily engender the full potential of its transformative effects as a result (Lomas, 2017). It also comes at the risk of developing a “wrong mindfulness” that could lead to undesirable consequences (Monteiro et al., 2015). Instead, mindfulness in Buddhism is typically thought of as Right Mindfulness, which, unlike the faculty of mindfulness, is only considered complete if present-centeredness is permeated with ethical discernment (Lomas, 2017; Wallace & Bodhi, 2006). This is reflected in particular components of the Noble Eightfold Path, such as Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, which form the ethical foundations for the development of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011a).

It is important to note that Buddhist ethics go beyond mere restraint from harm; they involve the active cultivation of prosocial and virtuous qualities (Lomas, 2017). In fact, canonical guidelines distinguish between wholesome/skillful and unwholesome/unskillful motivations. Unwholesomeness arises from motivations rooted in greed, hatred, or delusion, known as the “three poisons” (Monteiro et al., 2015). Wholesomeness, on the other hand, is cultivated through qualities such as loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, known as the “four immeasurables” (Eppert, 2010). Therefore, mindfulness includes a heedfulness that recognizes and cultivates the wholesome and skillful while renouncing the unwholesome and unskillful. To this end, assessing the ethicality of phenomena involves making judgments of moral nature about whether they align with virtuous or unvirtuous qualities, guiding the practitioner toward a clearer discernment of the ethical dimensions of intentions and momentary experience (Dunne, 2015).

Mindfulness is also generally not seen as a practice requiring compliance with pre-established codes of ethics. The ethical factors described in Buddhist teachings serve more as guidance for what the mindfulness practitioner may encounter. As hinted by Grossman (2015), Buddhist ethics are learned through a bottom-up personal exploration of mindfulness practice, rather than being imposed by an external authority. Correspondingly, Brazier (2018) suggested that instead of being shaped by ethical codes, mindfulness is actually at the origin of their development. When properly applied, mindfulness leads to a clear comprehension of reality, enabling the spontaneous integration of ethical behavior. That process occurs as one gains the ability to see through

the adverse effects of what is unwholesome and the benefits of what is wholesome. In other words, it is through mindfulness that one builds ethics.

The significance of ethics for mindfulness as a point of convergence among scholars adhering to traditional conceptions is also supported by the roles of both memory and present-centered awareness. Viewing sati as memory involves recalling Buddhist teachings and personal experiences to clarify ethical conduct. Present-moment awareness, when imbued with clear comprehension and ethical discernment, is in itself used as a means to develop and pursue wholesome thoughts, feelings, and actions. The role of memory and present-centeredness is to gain deep insight into one’s experiences and understand the ethical implications of perceptual phenomena (Wallace & Bodhi, 2006). As Dorjee (2010) put it, “the goal of mindfulness training is refinement of attentional control to the point where it can be effortlessly used in cultivation of wholesome emotions and investigation of the nature of consciousness” (p. 154).

Summary of Buddhist Conceptualizations of Mindfulness

From the diverse interpretations of Buddhist mindfulness, it is clear that traditional definitions vary in their treatment of memory and present-moment awareness while converging regarding ethicality. Many of the core facets of traditional mindfulness are associated with other elements of the Eightfold Path. Simplifying mindfulness by divorcing it from its original intricate context may reduce its conceptual ambiguity, but it certainly comes at the cost of diminishing its richness. Given the differences across frameworks, it is worth noting that Buddhist conceptualizations of mindfulness arose within specific contexts and served different purposes within them, rather than with the intention of achieving a unified definition. All in all, from a Buddhist perspective, mindfulness can be viewed as a practical concept of experiential observation, through which one explores, recalls, and applies what is learned from canonical teachings and by attending to momentary experience, while cultivating wholesome qualities and diligent ethics as a means to develop insight into the nature of phenomena in the path to the cessation of suffering. In this intricate context, it is relevant to bear in mind that while science attempts to grasp the whole by reducing it to its parts, the holistic interrelationship between elements can paint a picture that such reductions cannot capture.

Mindfulness in Psychological Science

Although the contemporary definitions of mindfulness diverge from the traditional Buddhist notions, its adaptation in psychological science has proven particularly successful

in the development of new therapies, programs, and research avenues. Buddhism and mindfulness stirred the curiosity of Western philosophers since the early nineteenth century, but scholars trace the roots of contemporary views of mindfulness to the twentieth century in Burma, which fueled the development of modern Buddhism (McMahan, 2008). At the time, few laypeople could enjoy the benefits of assiduous mindfulness practice in traditional Buddhist terms, and a movement towards the popularization of mindfulness started taking place (Sharf, 2015). As a result, meditation and mindfulness began to be put at the forefront of Buddhist practice, at the expense of some other aspects of Buddhism deemed too difficult to grasp and develop. Mindfulness was thus simplified, reformulated, and adapted to become more accessible to laypeople (McMahan, 2008; Sharf, 2015). Its ensuing popularity led to an exceptionally rapid proliferation of its practice and conceptualization in other Buddhist countries and, eventually, in the Western world.

In this modern era, Buddhist scholars not only kept the connection of mindfulness to its traditional roots intact, but also focused on its foundational and simplest aspects, such as bare attention, in the context of expanding the practice of mindfulness to the laity (Gethin, 2011). Meanwhile, through frequent contact with the Western world, the compatibility between science and Buddhism became apparent for academics and Buddhist scholars alike (Ditrich, 2016). As a result, mindfulness gradually became understood in Western terms to facilitate its study, thus congruent with the secularity of scientific inquiry. Nevertheless, as is the case for *sati* and mindfulness, translating Buddhist terminology from Pali to other languages is challenging, often resulting in a loss of nuanced meanings that might be buried or simplified in this translation (Bodhi, 2011a). This issue demonstrates the challenges of conveying the entire breadth of Buddhist thoughts across various linguistic and cultural settings. This led to the subsequent tendency for contemporary definitions of mindfulness to define it in its simplest form as bare, present-centered attention, all the while detaching from the more complex conceptions of Right Mindfulness. For instance, Thich Nhat Hanh (1976) simply defined it as “keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” (p. 11). While certain views argue against such a simplistic adaptation, others suggest that these recent developments in the definition of mindfulness may represent a completely new paradigm that, while inspired by Buddhism, possesses its own culture (Schmidt, 2011; Thupten, 2019).

For some psychological conceptions of mindfulness, however, the influence of Buddhist thought still holds a significant importance. Such frameworks explicitly draw from Buddhist teachings and encourage a clearer acknowledgment of their relevance for mindfulness (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006). For instance, the value of developing ethics and wisdom through mindfulness has been reaffirmed in multiple

accounts (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011; Karunamuni & Weerasekera, 2019; Purser & Milillo, 2015; Shonin et al., 2013). In addition, many researchers advocate for a practice of mindfulness that incorporates attitudes and qualities originating from Buddhism, including compassion towards oneself and others (Germer & Neff, 2019) and loving-kindness (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999; Salzberg, 2011). Other views emphasize the importance of self-transcendence as a core mechanism of mindfulness (Verhaeghen, 2019), supporting the development of virtues and eudemonic well-being (Verhaeghen, 2021). These frameworks contributed to the development of a second generation of mindfulness interventions that are more aligned with a Buddhist psycho-spiritual paradigm (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020).

Presently, a major issue with psychological science definitions of mindfulness is that current accounts of mindfulness, while well-suited as operational definitions, fail to serve the purpose of theoretical development (Dreyfus, 2011). This may come at the cost of confining the conceptual theorizing on mindfulness to its measurability. Even so, current measures of mindfulness, which are direct reflections of their operational definitions, appear to hold important conceptual differences (Park et al., 2013; Preissner et al., 2024). These dissimilarities are manifested in the aspects they emphasize, the way they are constructed, and the diverse range of correlations between different scales (Bergomi et al., 2013). As such, some conceptions of mindfulness consider it to be a unidimensional lack of absent-mindedness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), while others think of it as a multidimensional construct comprising facets relating to the “what” and “how” of mindfulness (Baer et al., 2006). In addition, mindfulness can be thought of in many different ways, with existing operational definitions considering it as a trait (Baer et al., 2006), state (Lau et al., 2006), or set of skills (Linehan, 1993). Taken together, the multiplicity of definitions reflects a relative lack of convergence on how to think about mindfulness. Still, some agreement on the core components of what defines it has emerged.

At present, most definitions of mindfulness appear to align with that of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), suggesting that mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (p. 145). Most definitions that followed conceptualized mindfulness according to two axes to clarify “what” it is and “how” it can be practiced (i.e., the qualities of attention) (Bishop et al., 2004). A few other conceptions of mindfulness have been proposed (Langer & Ngnoumen, 2017), which position mindfulness as the opposite of mindlessness, through which one develops new categories, opens to novelty, and becomes flexible and receptive to a variety of perspectives. Nevertheless, such conceptions arise from different contexts and reflect distinct understandings

of mindfulness (Karl & Fischer, 2020), and will therefore not be considered in this review. An examination of a variety of definitions in psychological science appears to place present-centered awareness (i.e., the “what”), as well as non-judgment and acceptance (i.e., the “how”), at the core of mindfulness, while certain attitudes and qualities, such as curiosity and non-attachment, are included more or less consistently (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). The two main components of contemporary mindfulness in psychological science, namely (a) present-centered awareness and bare attention and (b) the attitudes and qualities with which they are imbued, are reviewed below.

Present-Centered Awareness and Bare Attention

Psychological science widely accepts the view of mindfulness as a form of bare, present-centered awareness (Baer et al., 2004; Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Dimidjian & Linehan, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). It is seen as a basic human capacity that any individual can access by focusing on moment-to-moment experiences, instead of dwelling on past memories and future prospects. In essence, present-centered awareness works to counteract cognitive elaborations on what manifests itself in experience. To this end, this awareness involves attending to one’s somatic and sensorial, emotional, and cognitive experiences as a means to anchor in the here-and-now, with the aim of fostering deliberate action and reducing automatic and habitual responses (Kang et al., 2013).

Current contemporary definitions of mindfulness often include references to both attention and awareness. For some researchers, both notions fall under the wider concept of consciousness (Brown & Ryan, 2003). While awareness is seen as “the background ‘radar’ of consciousness, continually monitoring the inner and outer environment,” attention is “a process of focusing conscious awareness, providing heightened sensitivity to a limited range of experience” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822). As awareness is the field on which observable phenomena take place, being in the here-and-now widens the scope of experiences that one can consciously access through attention, thus enriching momentary experience. In the context of mindfulness, the attention is bare, meaning that it is devoid of further processing. According to Nyanaponika (1962, cited in Dreyfus, 2011), this type of attention is “a bare registering of the facts observed, without reacting to them by deed, speech or mental comment which may be one of self-reference (like, dislike, etc.), judgement or reflection” (p. 45). Thus, mindfulness involves present-moment awareness with bare attention.

The attention involved in mindfulness also needs to be directed and redirected so as to sustain it in the here-and-now, as a means to have a clearer view of perceptual phenomena (sensations, thoughts, feelings, etc.). Accordingly,

the definition of Bishop et al. (2004) and the model of Verhaeghen (2019) involve a component of attentional self-regulation. For other researchers, mindfulness is also described in terms of intentionality and purposefulness (Dimidjian & Linehan, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). This intentionality is sometimes defined in terms similar to the self-regulation of attention (Lau et al., 2006), but different usages of the term stress the importance of employing intentionality to set the motivation and direction that one intends to move towards by becoming more mindful (Shapiro et al., 2018). For example, such intentions may aim to develop an experiential understanding of the changing nature of bodily sensations and thoughts, or deepen the comprehension of how one’s mental states, sense of self, and relationship to experience influence well-being (Levit-Binnun et al., 2021). Importantly, purposefulness can also relate to the deliberate permeation of awareness and attention with certain qualities and attitudes (Kabat-Zinn, 2009), which highlights the need for a clarification of what such intentionality entails in mindfulness.

Qualities and Attitudes

While mindfulness is, at its core, viewed as present-centered awareness and bare attention, psychological definitions place a major emphasis on the qualities and attitudes that infuse it. In the words of Feldman (2001), “the quality of mindfulness is not a neutral or blank presence. True mindfulness is imbued with warmth, compassion, and interest” (p. 173). These qualities help adopt a particular stance when observing the contents of present-moment experience. The inclusion of such qualities in the definitions of mindfulness has been criticized by some researchers, for whom attitudes are not part of mindfulness itself. Instead, they are regarded as supplementary instructions aimed at facilitating the practice and development of mindfulness (Brown et al., 2007; Mikulas, 2015; Quaglia et al., 2015). Nonetheless, they remain a core aspect of mindfulness in most definitions, and evidence suggests that the attitudes accompanying mindfulness are a major component of their therapeutic effects (Lindsay & Creswell, 2017). The most common qualities associated with mindfulness are acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004; Germer, 2005) and non-judgment (Barcaccia et al., 2019). In a sense, these qualities can be seen as feeding back to bare attention, since they counteract evaluative elaborations of one’s experience. As such, the attitudes of non-judgment and acceptance allow the practitioner to see things as they are, without being biased by desirability, hedonic tone, or moral value. The purpose is to practice mindfulness in such a way as to become an impartial spectator of the unfolding of moment-to-moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

Given its subjective nature, one way to understand the non-judgment and acceptance of mindfulness is through phenomenological considerations of bare attention (Brown

& Cordon, 2009; Puc, 2019). In Husserlian terms, the bare attention of mindfulness closely resembles the process involved in the phenomenological reduction. It consists of a discontinuation of our habitual means of processing momentary subjective experience, called natural attitude. This is typically done by automatically cognizing and compartmentalizing experiences. In other words, the natural attitude is a form of filtering based on the representation we make of our perceptual experiences. These representations are typically rigid and inflexible, stemming from patterns of evaluations, past experiences, and preexisting schemas. Rather, phenomenological reduction entails an awareness that attends to internal and external events as they spontaneously appear, leading to a clearer view of reality in its organic manifestation. Nevertheless, mindfulness is specific in that it does not aim to bring the natural attitude to a halt, but rather to neutrally notice the mind's tendencies to engage in that type of processing. Thus, mindfulness is not a radical phenomenological reduction. Instead, it entails the suspension of judgment without striving to be completely devoid of it. In other words, even if one judges, mindfulness implies accepting it as a natural behavior of the mind and restraining from elaborating on the extent to which one judges (Paulson et al., 2013). Accordingly, those tendencies are also included in one's observations, rendering the attitude of non-judgment and acceptance pervasive to all of which is noticed.

Despite the shared understanding that non-judgment and acceptance are essential to mindfulness, many other attitudes have been included in various definitions and with different emphases. Examples of such qualities include curiosity (Bishop et al., 2004; Segal et al., 2018), receptivity (Bishop et al., 2004; Brown et al., 2007), loving-kindness (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999; Salzberg, 2011), and openness (Brown & Ryan, 2003), among others (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is worth noting that, more often than not, definitions can consist of a mix of multiple attitudes and qualities. Many of those terms appear to be overlapping and are sometimes used interchangeably. However, it is important to realize that each of them holds a specific meaning and colors one's experience in its unique way. The conceptual intersection of some of those attitudes with non-judgment and acceptance suggests that they can be considered central to the concept of mindfulness; meanwhile, diverse accounts of mindfulness make their relevance somewhat unclear. Thus, it appears that a semantic clarification of such qualities is needed to extract their meaning and associate them more intelligibly to mindfulness.

Summary of Psychological Science Definitions of Mindfulness

As reviewed above, the conceptualization of mindfulness in psychological science tends to center around

present-centered awareness and bare attention, guided by an attitude of non-judgment and acceptance. These two components are generally accepted by mindfulness researchers as central to the definition of mindfulness. Nevertheless, a few issues with current conceptions can be noted. First, the present-centeredness of awareness and bare attention remains slightly unclear. Indeed, awareness of the present moment is a vast concept that may need further elucidation as to what it entails. Clarifying what objects of attention are involved in mindfulness would be relevant to describe the areas in which present-centered awareness takes shape. This would help connect the here-and-now to tangible dimensions of experience, thus making this aspect of mindfulness more fathomable. Otherwise, one is still confronted with a concept of the present moment that can be too abstract to apprehend, which can lead to some confusion among practitioners (Purser, 2015).

Another noteworthy challenge of contemporary definitions of mindfulness regards the appositeness of qualities and attitudes besides non-judgment and acceptance. It appears that these attitudes conflate all other relevant qualities as they fall under their umbrella. This can be problematic because many of the attitudes reviewed appear to capture some important qualitative facets of mindfulness, somewhat analogous yet distinct from non-judgment and acceptance, that can have consequential effects on its conception. If they do fall under the same concept, however, clarifying this would make for a more complete conception of relevant mindfulness attitudes and what they imply. For many definitions, it remains unclear why certain qualities are included and others discarded. An explication of the meanings and degrees of implication of all these various attitudes and qualities for the definition of mindfulness is therefore required to advance theoretical endeavors.

Refining the Definition of Mindfulness in Psychological Science

While definitions of mindfulness in psychological science appear to share conceptual commonalities, it appears that ambiguity surrounding key concepts still needs to be overcome. A systematic thematic exploration of various definitions of mindfulness suggested that while awareness and attention, as well as present-centeredness, are commonly described as central in mindfulness definitions, aspects such as the attention to and awareness of external events, the cultivation of mindfulness, and ethicality are not commonly agreed upon (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016). Nevertheless, attitudinal and qualitative aspects of mindfulness appear to hold high importance across conceptions and definitions, although they may refer to distinctive aspects of experience (Barcaccia et al., 2019; Bishop et al., 2004; Brown & Ryan,

2003; Brown et al., 2007; Feldman, 2001; Germer, 2005; Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Lindsay & Creswell, 2017; Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999; Salzberg, 2011; Segal et al., 2018). It is relevant to note that definitions often reflect specific schools of thought and purposes. In the present paper, we have chosen to define mindfulness in the context of psychological science, broadly constructed to include cognitive science, emotion science, behavioral science, neuroscience, and biological and evolutionary psychology. As such, the definition is intended to support the conceptualization of mindfulness as a state, a trait, and a set of skills; the study of individual differences in mindfulness and relationships between mindfulness and other aspects of human functioning; the effects of therapeutic interventions and skills training programs; and methods of psychological assessment. In the following subsections, two refinements are suggested, namely (a) the addition of the range of experiences to which present-centeredness can be applied in mindfulness, and (b) the elucidation of the allowing and equanimous attitudes as the central qualities of mindfulness.

Clarifying Present-Centered Awareness

One of the central components of mindfulness is present-centeredness. Indeed, while it is generally assumed that mindfulness is, at its core, attending to the here-and-now, little is said about the elements of the present moment to which it is applied. Simply referring to the present could be insufficient given the complexity and vastness of what the present moment can manifest in experience. It is also a very abstract notion that can be difficult to grasp, potentially even misleading for practitioners trying to capture it (Purser, 2015). More specifically, the present moment is not a static or fixated point of a discrete or singular nature. It is rather a continuous, constantly evolving flux of fleeting experiences occurring across a variety of aspects of experience. Without any tangible point of reference, the present moment may become an elusive abstraction to designate this ever-changing flow of experiences, but that is difficult to pin down and fully engage with due to its elusive and transient nature. As a result, any attempts to be in the here-and-now may consist of intellectual exercises to grasp it, rather than immersing oneself in the dynamic experiencing of the richness of the present moment. It is worth noting that in contemporary mindfulness practice, present-moment awareness is often highlighted in relation to a specific object of attention, including the breath, the body, or one's thoughts (Segal et al., 2018). Accordingly, a clarification of the objects of present-centered awareness and attention can help refine the definition of mindfulness by targeting specific dimensions within the large span of phenomena available in the here-and-now.

Buddhist thought generally assumes that the objects of attention involved in the development of mindfulness are found in the satipaṭṭhāna (i.e., foundations of mindfulness), namely the body, emotions, mind, and mental objects and phenomena (i.e., dharma). In contemporary contexts, mindfulness-based programs and interventions also focus on some of these aspects (i.e., body, emotions, and mind), which reflect internal momentary experiences. In psychological science, these would translate into body sensations (including interoceptive signals; Gibson, 2019), affective valence (i.e., raw experience of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality, the equivalent of *vedanā* in Buddhist thought, also referred to as feeling or hedonic tones; Batchelor, 2019; Williams et al., 2022), and the mind (i.e., cognitions and emotions, including impulses and action tendencies). Nevertheless, the inclusion of dharma appears incompatible with psychological definitions, given the fact that it is charged with spiritual and philosophical insights and meanings that would not be universally applicable in the context of MBIs/MBPs. Indeed, the mindfulness of mental objects or phenomena consists of a contemplation based on Buddhist frameworks of soteriological nature, such as the five hindrances and the seven factors of awakening (Anālayo, 2013). While its goal is to develop insight into the nature of reality according to these frameworks, an understanding of canonical and doctrinal aspects is necessary to this end. As such, we instead suggest including elements of the external world that are perceived through the senses, best captured as “the external environment.” This relationship with external sensory phenomena has been described as important to the understanding of mindfulness (Bigman-Peer & Yovel, 2024). These include sights, sounds, scents, and other stimuli arising from any aspect of the environment, including natural phenomena, objects, other people, and activities. The definition of mindfulness thus becomes clarified by articulating categories of attentional objects, from the internal and external worlds, to which present-centered awareness can be applied and practiced. These four objects of attention in mindfulness are hereby referred to as the *scopes of mindfulness*.

Clarifying the scopes of mindfulness serves theoretical, practical, and research purposes. Theoretically, adding objects of attention to conceptions of mindfulness would bring some clarity into what present-centered awareness and bare attention involve. While awareness is the wide field on which all momentary experience is registered, it is generally accepted that attention needs to be volitionally or automatically directed at objects of focus for experience to reach conscious access. Hence, delineating the scopes of mindfulness would allow for a more substantial conception of what such present-centeredness involves and what it is directed at. As a direct application, this would also enable distinguishing the scopes of mindfulness

where present-moment awareness may be more challenging to develop. For example, a practitioner may be highly aware of body sensations and affective valence, but less so of cognitions and emotions. The scopes of mindfulness would therefore help identify specific areas of cultivation for the full development of mindfulness.

It is important to note that the scopes of mindfulness do not involve any particular type of attention found in mindfulness practice, such as the distributed and concentrative attention, respectively found in open-monitoring and focused-attention meditations. While the former rests on an open and unrestricted bottom-up attention to all that arises into awareness, the latter narrows awareness to one or a certain set of objects in a top-down manner. While focused-attention would evidently involve one of the four scopes of mindfulness, open-monitoring consists of a choiceless awareness devoid of an intentional observation of any particular scope, thus potentially involving any one of the scopes at any given time in moment-to-moment experience. Moreover, MBIs are typically offered in a way that incorporates both types of attention succinctly or concurrently, in agreement with Buddhist views that advocate for the development of mindfulness alongside concentrative abilities (Chiesa & Malinowski, 2011). Hence, all four scopes are subjected to both types of attentional and meditation-based training.

Practically, the addition of the four scopes of mindfulness would allow for a clearer idea of what it means to be fully in the present moment. This, to a large extent, is already done in mindfulness programs. Nonetheless, instructions that touch upon specific areas of the present moment can help practitioners have a better grasp of the present moment and help avoid confusion about what it means to be in the here-and-now. It would also help put the scopes of mindfulness in relation to one another during mindfulness practice, for instance by observing the manifestation of feeling tones in the body, or noticing how a social interaction brings certain thoughts and emotions to mind. Regarding research endeavors, such an addition to the definition of mindfulness can facilitate explorations into the psychological processes underpinning the practice of mindfulness, particularly when operationalized as an empirically quantifiable construct. Indeed, mindfulness research has uncovered beneficial underlying relationships to bodily and interoceptive awareness (Gibson, 2019; Treves et al., 2019), emotional awareness and regulation (Hill & Updegraff, 2012; Phillipot & Segal, 2009), cognitive functions (Whitfield et al., 2022), and prosocial behaviors and interpersonal functioning (Donald et al., 2019; Pratscher et al., 2018). By explicitly incorporating the four scopes of mindfulness into subsequent measurements, different psychological processes can be more clearly linked to the cultivation of mindfulness across specific objects of attention. Importantly, it would also facilitate attempts at item construction for future self-reported

scales of mindfulness that draw on the suggested scopes of mindfulness.

Delineating Mindfulness Qualities and Attitudes

The qualities and attitudes involved in mindfulness are multifaceted and often overlap. Although many of these attitudes have been described as essential to mindfulness in various accounts, their centrality remains unclear. Essentially, non-judgment and acceptance can be viewed as the core of the “how” of mindfulness and are often described as the main attitudes to bring conjointly to present-centered awareness. However, few accounts actually clarify how non-judgment, acceptance, and other attitudes described in other theoretical and practical frameworks of mindfulness, like curiosity, openness, receptivity, and non-attachment (Nilsson & Kazemi, 2016), for example, relate to each other and are conceptualized. Clarifying these aspects could help delineate and extract the core attitudinal components of mindfulness in order to refine and emphasize its fundamental elements. The following subsection thus reviews these attitudes, including non-judgment, acceptance, curiosity, receptivity, non-attachment, and openness, to offer a comprehensive view of their interrelationship. A new quality is then introduced and suggested as a core attitudinal component of mindfulness, namely the equanimous attitude.

Acceptance and Non-judgment

Acceptance and non-judgment play a central role in mindfulness. Many definitions of mindfulness include them both, and their overlap is worth exploring. The role of acceptance in mindfulness has received extensive attention in MBI manuals, including Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al., 2018). It consists of a “willingness to see things as they are” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 39) that serves the purpose of “allowing space for whatever is going on, rather than trying to create some other state” (Segal et al., 2018, p. 276). Current mindfulness definitions can thus be viewed as including an intentional stance of receptivity towards incoming momentary experience. Moreover, acceptance is, by definition, antithetical to judgments that categorize one’s experiences. In essence, accepting an event or object of attention requires the suspension of any elaborations on the judgments about it. Indeed, when one judges, the event or object of attention is no longer seen as it is, as it becomes filtered through the reductive lenses of those judgments. Since those judgments often arise automatically to evaluate one’s moment-to-moment experiences, non-judgment does not aim to stop judgments from occurring, which is a form of avoidance rooted in aversion that may be unlikely to succeed. Rather, it would consist of observing judgments

for what they are (i.e., thoughts) and allowing them to be without further elaborating and becoming attached to them. Through this non-judgmental process, events and objects appear as they actually are in their entirety. Since accepting something means seeing it as it is, it becomes clear how non-judgment is necessary for the experience of acceptance, and how both appear to be mutually inclusive. More specifically, non-judgment is typically seen as a component of acceptance, while acceptance is conceived as a larger overarching quality that englobes many others, including non-attachment, non-avoidance, and non-judgment (Williams & Lynn, 2010).

Beyond being non-judgmental, other qualities can also map into acceptance. For instance, curiosity has been put in relation to acceptance, as “bringing a gentle curiosity to something is, itself, part of acceptance” (Segal et al., 2018, p. 279). That is to say that acceptance is an active attitude that cultivates a certain interest and willingness to experience events and phenomena. Moreover, letting go, which is intrinsically equivalent to non-attachment, can also be seen as an act of acceptance. In this context, non-attachment implies “noticing a hold on something such as clinging to the positive or avoiding the negative, and releasing the need to categorize internal experiences as positive or negative” (Tremblay et al., 2024, p. 1283). It also includes openly welcoming experiences without resistance by being present and attending to internal experiences, as well as building perceptual distance to lessen reactivity to stimuli (Tremblay et al., 2024). As such, acceptance essentially seems to involve letting go of any resistance to experiencing things as they are, including the judgments that repudiate such experiencing. Acceptance is thus an act of allowing that permits experiences to come to awareness without the distortions brought about by judgments and the tendencies to avoid and hold onto what presents itself in awareness. It serves the purpose of welcoming and letting experiences in as they come, in an open and unrestricted way. All in all, acceptance is the factor that enables the full experiencing of momentary phenomena, events, and mental states by circumventing initial obstacles like judgments, resistance, attachment, and avoidance.

The above discussion suggests that the role of acceptance is to facilitate the full, non-evaluative experiencing of momentary experience. In a description of acceptance rooted in psychological science and uninformed by Buddhist thought, Hayes et al. (2011) suggested that “the preferred alternative to experiential avoidance is acceptance” (p. 23). While the previously reviewed discussions of acceptance, all informed by Buddhist frameworks, seem to encompass all four scopes of mindfulness and present-moment experience in general, their views characterize acceptance as being “focused particularly on the emotional aspects of human experience” (Hayes et al., 2011, p. 66). It would involve “the active process of engaging and at times even enhancing

the rich complexity of one’s emotional reactions as a means of furthering psychological openness, learning, and compassion towards oneself and others” (Hayes et al., 2011, p. 23). The idea that acceptance is mostly applicable to emotional processes might be due to views that consider it as an emotion regulation strategy (Wojnarowska et al., 2020) and as a key driver behind the emotional regulative effects of mindfulness (Lindsay & Creswell, 2019). Nevertheless, this distinction may reflect a conceptualization of acceptance that is primarily confined to psychological theory and that does not draw on Buddhist thought. Focusing on its role in emotional regulation may result in a narrower view of acceptance, thereby limiting its applicability to a single dimension of experience. In contrast, psychological conceptions informed by Buddhist thought suggest that acceptance can be seen as an attitude that opens up awareness to momentary experience so that one observes its contents more fully. Hence, engaging with the complexity of emotional reactions is but one side of what acceptance can enhance, and it can equally do so with the array of bodily sensations, cognitive processes, and interactions with the environment that arise in one’s present-moment experiences. As a result, acceptance allows taking in whatever presents itself in awareness without further elaboration, avoidance, or attachment to any judgment that may present itself, thus equally affecting all different scopes of mindfulness.

Importantly, while acceptance means being receptive and open, to take in all experiences without avoiding, resisting, or judging them, the term can sometimes be taken to denote passivity and resignation, especially among novice mindfulness practitioners. The distinction between an active acceptance and a resigning acceptance leads to clearly differentiated effects, as the beneficial impact of the former contrasts with the maladaptive consequences of the latter (Nakamura & Orth, 2005). As such, we suggest using the term “allowing” to refer to the reviewed description of an active acceptance. This would help remove the danger of its potential connoted misguidance. Yet, although the role of the allowing attitude is now defined, little is said about the qualities to adopt as momentary experiences are permitted to seamlessly flow into awareness. In this view, an essential attitudinal aspect of mindfulness would relate to how to respond to phenomena that emerge into present-centered awareness as we allow them to be. Hence, the equanimous attitude is suggested as an additional attitude of mindfulness. While the allowing attitude enables experiences to flow more easily into awareness as they are, the equanimous attitude would relate to the stance to adopt when observing the coming and passing of these experiences, that is, without being attached to or repulsed by them. This attitude is explored in more detail in the following sub-section.

The Equanimous Attitude

In Buddhist thought, equanimity (*upekkhā*) is considered to be one of the four immeasurables, along with loving-kindness, compassion, and sympathetic joy (Eppert, 2010). It is understood as (a) a state of mental balance, (b) hedonic neutrality, and/or (c) interpersonal impartiality, each of which applies to different foundations of mindfulness (Anālayo, 2021). In this view, equanimity represents a serene and unbiased attitude toward all experiences, regardless of their pleasantness or unpleasantness. While important for Buddhist frameworks, the core quality of maintaining mental balance and even-mindedness transcends specific cultural, philosophical, and spiritual contexts. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “equanimity” is derived from the Latin *aequanimitas*, which combines *aequus* (i.e., even or equal) and *animus* (i.e., mind). This etymological foundation underscores a universal concept of mental equilibrium that can be applicable across various secular and cultural frameworks. Thus, notwithstanding its discussions in Buddhist discourse, equanimity can be viewed as a broader secular concept, reflecting a quality of balanced mental engagement that is relevant to contemporary psychological research and practice.

Incorporating equanimity in psychological contexts can be informed by Buddhist principles and provides a valuable framework for psychological conceptualizations of mindfulness. Unlike other immeasurables, equanimity directly supports the development of a balanced and impartial attitude toward experiences and emotional stimuli (Juneau et al., 2021). In this sense, equanimity appears as an appropriate construct that aligns well with secular approaches in conceptualizing mindfulness. While inspired by Buddhist teachings, equanimity’s application is not confined to any specific tradition, making it a universally relevant concept that enhances mindfulness frameworks and practices across diverse contexts. It is worth noting that this may not be equally viable for the other three immeasurables. Indeed, in the context of mindfulness training programs, attempts to cultivate self-compassion and loving-kindness can have undesirable consequences for vulnerable populations (Cai, 2024). For instance, cultivating compassion and kindness to oneself can sometimes lead to backdraft effects, manifested as distress and negative affect (Neff & Germer, 2022). Further, when unsuccessful, the practice of loving-kindness can lead to ruminations about feelings of failure or being unlovable (Segal et al., 2018). As such, equanimity is more directly aligned with mindfulness and is less likely to cause such adverse effects. While the other three immeasurables are valuable, they are not considered to be at the core of mindfulness and can be developed through their own set of practices (Anālayo, 2019b; Zheng et al., 2022).

Within psychological science, equanimity has been receiving increasing, albeit insufficient attention, specifically in the context of mindfulness (Weber, 2021). While the Buddhist contributions to its current conception and its relationship to mindfulness are well established, the link between equanimity and mindfulness varies according to how it is defined (Anālayo, 2021). One definition of equanimity relates it to equipoise, or a state of mental balance. Desbordes et al. (2015) describe it as an “even-minded state of dispositional tendency toward all experiences or objects, regardless of their origins or affective valence” (p. 357). Differently, Hadash et al. (2016) have described it as the decoupling between the affective valences of an experience (i.e., pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral) from one’s desires. As such, equanimity would lessen the automatic association between experiencing an unpleasant phenomenon and the subsequent desire for the experience to stop or be any different, for instance. In this sense, as with other immeasurables, equanimity can be conceived as a distinct trait-like faculty, and more specifically as an outcome of mindfulness (Desbordes et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, defining mindfulness through its outcomes is argued to be theoretically problematic, since conflating a concept with its purported effects diminishes its construct validity and the accuracy of the measurements that follow (Brown et al., 2007). In the present case, the issue only holds if equanimity is thought of as an ability that may or may not develop with mindfulness. Yet, equanimity can also be conceived as an attitude that allows for its development, for instance as an “intentional stance not to hold on nor push away” (Hadash et al., 2016, p. 1215). By defining it as an attitude promoting calmness and non-reactivity to the awareness of phenomena, equanimity is more directly linked to mindfulness and becomes one of its active components (Anālayo, 2021). One way to make a distinction between equanimity as an outcome and as a central aspect of mindfulness is to separate “equanimity” from the “equanimous attitude.” While equanimity would relate to the ability to be equanimous, defined as an all-around even-mindedness and mental balance, the equanimous attitude would be the active adoption of a particular stance toward experience that helps foster mindfulness—and equanimity— while being integral to it through the way one responds to experience. As such, we suggest that the equanimous attitude is a reconceptualization of equanimity as a distinctive construct within psychological research, while acknowledging that equanimity retains its own significance as an outcome of mindfulness practice. While inspired by Buddhist thought, it is here construed as a core component of mindfulness, unbounded by philosophical and spiritual traditions, and with secular applicability in psychological science.

In the context of mindfulness, the equanimous attitude serves a regulatory purpose by altering the way we relate

to and respond to experiences as they emerge in awareness. It also shapes the way in which the dynamic fluctuations of experiences taking place in awareness are engaged with. In particular, it involves non-attachment and non-resistance to what is contained in present-moment awareness and to the shifts in momentary experience so as to remain an impartial observer of it (Eberth et al., 2019). In other words, the equanimous attitude plays a role in staying with what is experienced, continuously monitoring its changes, and remaining in the witnessing seat throughout. The equanimous attitude is thus akin to the “being mode” described in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (Segal et al., 2018). It also brings about an active and equal attention to phenomena, objects, and experiences regardless of their affective valence. Instead of reacting automatically to changes in experience, it opens the space through which one can respond regardless of whether experiences are perceived to be enjoyable, unpleasant, or simply neutral. Therefore, the equanimous attitude also involves non-striving in that it does not aim to generate a different state or experience to what is already present, but rather to stay in a mode of observation (Eberth et al., 2019). Hence, the regulative aspect of the equanimous attitude is found in the persistence of being a calm, non-reactive, and interested observer in the face of ever-changing experiences.

The Interplay of the Allowing and Equanimous Attitudes

Certain frameworks have put equanimity and other attitudes under the overarching acceptance and allowing construct (Lindsay & Creswell, 2017). Nonetheless, the equanimous attitude is different from allowing in that it aims to sustain oneself in the role of the observer amidst the contents of awareness and its changes, whereas the allowing attitude would enable phenomena to be fully experienced and to enter awareness in an integrated manner. While the allowing attitude opens awareness for all experiences, the equanimous attitude helps maintain impartiality as the coming and passing of events and phenomena are experienced. Nevertheless, their common ground can be found in their tendency to ascribe equal importance to all experiences. They also both involve letting go and non-judgment, albeit in different ways. While the allowing attitude consists of letting go of initial judgment and resistance that limit one’s experiencing of perceptual phenomena within awareness, the equanimous attitude helps letting go of experiences themselves, permitting their natural cycle of entry and exit in and out of awareness to unfold. Judgments about the affective valence of experiences are also monitored in order to attend to all experiences equally, without avoiding displeasure and clinging to pleasure. Moreover, the allowing attitude involves some degree of initial non-reactivity to experiences as they emerge in awareness, while the equanimous attitude is non-reactive

to changes in experience and to hedonic categorizations in order to maintain calmness and composure within the role of the observer.

The allowing and equanimous attitudes co-occur as experiences enter, stay, and leave present-moment awareness, and can thus be seen as highly complementary and synergetic attitudes. The allowing attitude is necessary for the initial contact with a certain experience as it enables perceptual phenomena to flow into awareness without resistance. The equanimous attitude plays a particular role in changes in experiences, as they will be held in awareness for a certain time and need to be regulated in such a way as to remain an impartial witness of it all. Thus, the allowing and equanimous attitudes constantly work together to take perceptual phenomena into awareness, observe their passing, and stay in the being mode regardless of their affective and hedonic valence.

Discussion

This paper aimed to clarify the core components of traditional and contemporary definitions of mindfulness. In doing so, it appears that Buddhist conceptions highlight the role of (a) remembering, (b) present-centered awareness, and (c) ethics. The complexity of Buddhist mindfulness arises from diverse interpretations across schools and its interconnection with broader aspects of Buddhist philosophy. Various perspectives have been suggested by scholars regarding the role of memory in mindfulness. It appears that, although important, its role varies from being a consequence of mindfulness, a core component involved in retention and remembrance, or a practical aspect that aims to redirect the practitioner’s attention back to mindfulness. Similarly, present-centered awareness remains an object of discussion, with some scholars readily conceiving it as central to mindfulness, while others assign a secondary and incidental role to it. While ethics is widely acknowledged as central to Buddhist mindfulness, its precise role—whether it pervades mindfulness, arises as a consequence of mindful exploration, or co-develops with mindfulness—remains open to interpretation.

Notwithstanding the complexity of mindfulness in Buddhist thought, it is influential in shaping the main definitions in contemporary psychological discourse. The psychological science definitions place (a) present-centered awareness and bare attention and (b) non-judgment and acceptance at their core. In contrast to Buddhist views, there is greater conceptual overlap within psychological science definitions, which typically reflect the understanding suggested by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003). Still, conceptual refinements are needed. This includes the clarification of the objects of present-centered awareness and bare attention involved in mindfulness, and

the elucidation of what attitudes and qualities are central to the definition of mindfulness. All in all, it appears that both traditional and contemporary conceptions somewhat agree that present-centered awareness is central to the definition of mindfulness and that such awareness needs to be imbued with additional qualitative and attitudinal features.

Nonetheless, significant differences can be noted between traditional and contemporary views, particularly with regard to the role of ethics and memory, both of which do not hold any explicit role in contemporary definitions of mindfulness in psychological science. In particular, non-judgment and acceptance are seen as impediments to the Buddhist view of Right Mindfulness, as they contrast with the essential aspect of ethical discernment, which is a deliberate judgment of moral nature. Moreover, while present-day inquiries view mindfulness as an intrinsic human faculty that can be described using a standalone definition, Buddhist accounts consider Right Mindfulness as a capacity that is deeply connected to numerous other aspects that one needs to cultivate if it is to be developed. It is worth noting that these differences can be seen as stemming from the intentions of each paradigm in defining mindfulness.

Both traditional and contemporary conceptions of mindfulness aim to reduce suffering (Purser, 2015), but each has its own way of doing so and emphasizes different aspects of human afflictions. Contemporary mindfulness focuses on alleviating symptoms and clinical conditions and enhancing well-being, while Buddhism employs mindfulness as an aspect of the path towards reaching enlightenment and eradicating all suffering. Using the Buddhist framework of suffering, Purser (2015) described its three levels. First-degree suffering relates to natural and unavoidable mental and physical pain, which can nonetheless be exacerbated by cognitive elaborations and judgments about one's torment. Second-degree suffering consists of resistance and aversion to change, leading to attachment to the current state of things. The third degree of suffering is more primordial in that it relates to existential fear and angst, grounded in the apprehension that the self is a mere construction that can be dissolved into nothingness. In this framework, mindfulness in psychological science would mainly help individuals cope with first-degree suffering, but does not explicitly dive into the depth of resolving the second and third levels of suffering, which appear better suited as an aim of mindfulness within its original Buddhist context.

As a response, a second generation of mindfulness-based therapies is developing to address deeper forms of suffering by including Buddhist ethics (Van Gordon & Shonin, 2020). However, ethical concerns remain regarding their applicability in secular contexts, with particular concerns raised about potential harm or misguidance when dealing with ethicality (Baer, 2015). Indeed, alleviating deeper forms of suffering

through Buddhist mindfulness entails the teaching and endorsement of its doctrines and soteriology, which raises serious ethical concerns for MBP teachers, MBI therapists, and participants alike. All in all, traditional and contemporary mindfulness conceptions and practices emphasize different aspects of human afflictions. Nevertheless, while contemporary mindfulness research can be seen as having its own paradigm and culture that differs in some respects from the Buddhist framework, it could benefit from incorporating aspects of traditional mindfulness into its guiding definitions, particularly in relation to the contentious issue of the qualities of mindfulness discussed earlier. An example of this integration can be found in equanimity (Anālayo, 2021). In this sense, future research should aim to identify key domains through which a dialogue between the two perspectives is possible and universally applicable.

Suggested Refined Definition

In this article, we have suggested further clarifications to the contemporary conception of mindfulness. Specifically, the suggested refinements pertain to a definition of mindfulness that would be of use within psychological science, particularly for the development of new mindfulness measures. Depending on the aims of the generated measures, the definition can serve as a basis for the measurement of mindfulness as a state, trait, or skill. All in all, we suggest that mindfulness can be defined as:

Present-centered awareness of and bare attention to body sensations, affective valence, cognitive and emotional phenomena, and the external environment with an allowing and equanimous attitude.

The four scopes clarify present-centered awareness and address ambiguities about the here-and-now. Two central qualities of mindfulness practice were also suggested: the allowing and equanimous attitudes. The allowing attitude involves being open and curious about what presents itself in experience, without judging, rejecting, or avoiding it, in order to take in all perceptual phenomena within awareness in their entirety. On the other hand, the equanimous attitude would be relevant for the contents of awareness as they are taken in, enabling the coming and passing of experiences in and out of awareness, regardless of their affective valence, while remaining an impartial and interested observer of perceptual phenomena. In this sense, the allowing and equanimous attitudes contribute synergistically to mindfulness. We propose that both attitudes are not outcomes of mindfulness, but are central to its understanding. In suggesting the equanimous attitude, we clarified the distinction between equanimity as an outcome versus a component of mindfulness, which re-conceptualizes equanimity as a core quality

of mindfulness within a secular framework, informed by but not confined to Buddhist thought.

Limitations and Future Directions

This paper explored the definitions of mindfulness from Buddhist and psychological perspectives. It aimed to provide a comprehensive review of its various conceptions and nuances, and suggested refinements to its current psychological definitions. It is worth noting that the review was narrative and intended to provide a deeper appraisal of the diverse opinions, debates, and angles present in the literature. Despite efforts to ensure a broad and iterative search strategy, the non-systematic approach may have excluded some relevant studies, increasing the risk of selection bias. In addition, some definitions were intentionally left out of the review due to their inapplicability to psychological science investigations. The authors acknowledge that their understanding of Buddhist conceptions is limited, which may constrain the depth of discussion on these aspects. The review also relied on other scholars' translations and understandings of original canonical texts, which may limit the comprehensive appraisal of Buddhist conceptions.

Conclusion

The present attempt to refine the definition of mindfulness recognizes the challenges posed by the multiplicity of conceptualizations across Buddhist and psychological frameworks. While psychological science initially drew from Buddhist thought, it has evolved to emphasize different aspects of mindfulness and to pursue different aims and objectives. The present paper does not aim to propose a unified definition of mindfulness that comprehensively integrates both scholarly and academic traditions. Given the inherent differences in conception across Buddhist and psychological understandings of mindfulness, such an attempt may result in a loss of specificity and clarity and would limit the definition's applicability and measurability. Instead, the suggested refinements acknowledge and are informed by both traditions, but remain tailored to meet the specific needs of psychological research. This allows retaining the theoretical depth provided by Buddhist roots while ensuring the definition's precision within contemporary psychological science. In conclusion, the authors hope that this paper may inform mindfulness researchers working in psychological science about the richness of the concept, highlight areas of agreement and divergence across perspectives, and offer refinements to the conceptualization of mindfulness for future developments in theory, assessment, research, and practice.

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Data Availability No new data were generated or analyzed in this study. This study is a narrative review based on publicly available sources and previously published literature. There are no data associated with this article.

Declarations

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Use of Artificial Intelligence AI was not used.

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